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Sri Achyutananda Das



Achyutananda Das was a 16th century poet seer and Vaishnava saint from Orissa, India. He was considered to have the power to see the past, present and future. He was a prolific author, and one of the groups of five, that led a revolution in spirituality in Orissa by translating Sanskrit texts into the Oriya language for common people. He was one of the famous five friends of spirituality and literature Panchasakhā, who transcribed ancient Hindu Sanskrit texts into Oriya, for the people of Udra Desha (Orissa).

Shri Achyutananda Das was the most prolific writer of the Panchasakhas and wrote numerous books, many of which could be loosely translated as the Book of Prophecies. He is known as the Mahapurusha (a Great Person) for his vast knowledge on many subjects such as spirituality, Yoga, rituals, Buddhist Tantra, Ayurveda (science of life, longevity and medicine), and other various science and social regulations.

Early Life

As Achyutananda became a popular figure, much of his life began to become legend. He is famous for being one of the few who wrote about the social situation of his time and this is a scholarly reason many study his writings. His poetry was often cryptic about himself, and written in code or analogies. Achyutananda belonged to Karana caste by birth, but some claim he was Khandayata. His surname Das means servant of God. Achyutānanda was born in a village by the name 'Tilakana', where two distributaries of the Mahanadi, Luna(Labana Dhara) and Chitrotpala bifurcated, of Cuttack district of Orissa, during the twenty first anka (year of region) of the Gajapati (King) Purushottam Deva. This is thought to be somewhere between 1480 and 1505 by different scholars.

His mother was Padmavati, and his father was Dinabandhu Khuntia, and his grandfather was Gopinath Mohanty, a scribe in the Jagannath Temple (Puri). He was born after his mother prayed at the pillar in front of the Jagannath Temple, and his father had a dream that the divine bird Garuda brought him a child. In legend he is believed to be an incarnation of Garuda. Achyutānanda had a formal education in Puri. It is agreed by most texts that he met Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in his youth, and became the youngest of the Panchasakhā.

Panchasakhā

Achyutānanda was part of the famous Panchasakhā (five friends), who lived between 1450 to 1550 CE. The contemporaneous five saints - Acyutānanda Das, Ananta Das, Jasovanta Das, Jagannātha Das, and Balarāma Das, shaped Vaisnava philosophy, spiritualism and literature of Orissa. Two important factors set the Panchasakhas apart from other Indian Hindu Saints. They were the first to take the Hindu Sanskrit texts into the reach of the common people, by translating them into the local language (Oriya). This was first done by Sāralā Dasa's translation of the Mahābhārata in the mid-fifteenth century, followed by Balarama Dasa's Jagamohana Ramayana, Jaganath Dasa's Bhagavata Purana, and Achyutananda Dasa's Harivamsa. The second aspect is their form of Oriya Vaisnavism, which sees God as the "Shunya Purusha" and the nature of the soul as being able to merge into the Absolute.

Utkaliya Vaisnavism

Utkaliya Vaisnavism (sometimes called Oriya Vaisnavism) developed into its present state, in the 15th century. According to the Panchasakhas, Lord Jagannath is the 'Purna-Brahma', and all the avatars of Vishnu emanate from Him, and also enter into Him at the end. Jagannatha was the chief god of the devotional sect. The chief ideal of the Panchasakhas was that, as a bhakta they would be faithful, humble, learned, selfless, active, and benevolent and affectionate. The Panchasakhas were against the caste system, they considered all beings as one. They translated the Sanskrit Classics into local language, Oriya. Anyone could become a Vaishnava, even Muslims.

At the time of Shri Chaitanya, his followers who came from Nadia, called later as Gaudiya, were considering

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them greater or superior to the Utkaliya Vaisnavas and were disregarding them. So there was a cold war between them. Knowing this, Shri Chaitanya conferred the title of 'Atibadi' (the great) on Jagannatha Das to keep up the dignity of the Utkaliya Vaisnavas. But it brought no solution, and on the other had created conflict among them. The conflict of these two groups is evident in the Basana Charita Gita of Achyutananda, and even in modern day derogatory language of the Gaudiya towards the Utkaliya Vaishnavas.

Philosophical Ideology of Achyutananda Sunya Purusha

**nāhi tākāra rūpa varna, adrsha avarna tā cinha.
tākāku brahmā boli kahi, sunya brahmhati se bolāi.**

It has no shape, no colour,
It is invisible and without a name
This Brahman is called Shunya Brahman.

Achyutananda (and the other four saints) believed in a concept of God (Visnu) as Sunya (emptiness, void, zero) called Shunya Purusha and/or Shunya Brahman. This shunya signifies a transcendental principle that eludes the conceptual nexus applied to human thinking as described in the Upanishads. Achyutananda's culminating work is called the Shunya Samhita where he discusses this philosophy in depth.

Sūnyara ākāra viira Sunyara vicāra, sunye thāi dekha vīra e sacarācara. dekha e sacarācara sunnyare prakāsha, sunyu ude hoicanti sunyare vilāse.

Oh vira look at the shunya
By placing yourself in shunya,
And meditate on mahashunya,
Shunya itself is the form,
Ground of all discriminating knowledge.
Look at the whole world from the pedestal of shunya;
You will find everything manifested in the shunya,
Everything arises out of shunya and
Everything flourishes in the Shunya Brahman.

The philosophy is not the Shunya of the Buddhists, as it is not empty but full, sometimes even called the Purna Shunya (the full/complete void). The Panchasakhas project the deity Jagannatha as the embodiment of the Shunya Purusha. Achyutananda uses a classical (pre-Ramanuja) concept of Vaisnavism that uses both form, and formless aspects of god.

Jnana-mishrita Bhakti-marga

The Panchasakhas are very much Vaishnavas by thought. Chaitanya's path of devotion was known as Raganuga Bhakti Marga (brought to Orissa in 1509), which says all you need is love (bhakti) to get God. The Panchasakhas differed from Chaitanya's philosophy, and believed in Jnana-mishra Bhakti-marga, which states that one needs a combination of love (bhakti) and knowledge (jnana) to reach God. With our knowledge if we show our pure love (bhakti), we can definitely get the sunyatma(GOD). The Panchasakhas therefore promoted a Vaishnavism that involved study of scriptures, yoga, rituals, and devotion.

Pinda-Brahmānda Tattva

The concept of the Pinda-Brahmānda is that the body (pinda) is a replica of the Universe (Brahmānda), or microcosm is a reflection of the macrocosm. Much of the yogic teachings of Achyutananda are based on this core concept. His teachings are filled with references to outer locations existing as energies in the body.

Sabda Brahman

The concept of the Sabda Brahman is that, God created the universe as sound, and that all things have sound vibration as their essence. The writings of Achyutananda are filled with mantras and esoteric concepts about sounds and their effects on consciousness. For example, in Achyutananda's Rama Rasa Boli, the demon Ravana is said to have meditated on the sound "Sleem" while focusing on the ten other sacred sounds (yoga-dashakshara) to please Goddess Sita. Even more esoteric is this verse from the Shunya Rahasa where one can see the interwoven nature of internal yogic theory and sound found in Achyutananda's writings:

Oh Jnanins: utter the name of Hari [God]
May be you are the eldest or the youngest.
Piercing six chakras blooms the lotus
Near the ethereal void of air
Between the Sutala and Rasatala
The bee abides at the zenith of the void
One is not a servant of the Lord just because they have a rosary
Unless he utters the name of Krishna in his inner heart;
The Name is the seed, rosary its robe
Rosary is of no use if God's name is mindlessly uttered
The three cords are the three triadic streams
Make your oblations there
Ayudhya, Dwarika, and the city of Gopa
This knowledge is memorized by every soul.